

March Madness—Alaskan style

by Todd Eskelin



This pair of Trumpeter Swans waits for the ice to melt at the Kenai Flats in early April, 2006 (Todd Eskelin USFWS).

As many eyes turn to their television sets this week to watch the 7-10 match up between the Gamecocks and the Golden Eagles or the possible battle between the Jayhawks and the Eagles, Alaskans look over their shoulder and wonder “have we made it through the worst of it?” The daylight is lengthening and we are seeing the tell-tale signs of the S word that nobody dare utter. You look at the jagged south facing berms on the side of the road and sure enough they are shrinking at a considerable rate, while the north facing side looks smooth and the same as it did last week, last month, or even 2 months ago.

The resident bird species recognize the change in photoperiod too and they are not afraid to say it. Anyone with bird feeders may notice when black-capped chickadees start calling with a longer drawn out ca-

dence as the sunlight reaches your yard. They often start emitting a series of single whistles repeated over and over as the breeding season approaches. This is a notable shift from the “chickadee-dee-dee-dee” calls we have been hearing all winter. The nuthatches at my feeder have even started doing some pre-nesting singing and increased the rate of the constant backup alarms calls that they are incessantly broadcasting. A pair of Bald Eagles is bickering loudly outside my window as I write. Presumably the nest repair stick that was collected did not make the grade and a “discussion” has ensued.

The thing that is fascinating about year round resident bird species versus migrants is that residents are already here and many are willing to take advantage of an early nesting opportunity if the weather looks favorable. This does not always work out in their favor. I watched a Common Redpoll in Fairbanks one year that nested during a warm stretch in April only to have several inches of snow fall one night. She sat there in that nest for 2 days with an inch of snow on her back trying to keep her eggs warm, before abandoning the nest and starting over once it all melted.

The “madness” of March is that many species are trying to survive the last stretch of winter, but at the same time they need to fatten up and prepare for the upcoming breeding season. We have long known that health can be one of the biggest factors for reproductive success in birds and four-legged animals. Inadequate fat stores can reduce pregnancy rates, egg laying success, and survival of young after hatching or birth.

Locally, Trumpeter Swans that overwinter or arrive early in spring before ice-out must find ways to feed themselves and actually put on fat to successfully nest and raise young in the coming months. That means undisturbed access to open water and aquatic vegetation is critical during this period. Low fat stores do not bode well if they are to be successful in nesting, laying eggs and raising a brood.

Local birds are not the only ones that are evaluating the situation towards the end of winter. Red squirrels are becoming more active and with little new food available, they are reliant on whatever stores they put away last fall. This is often comprised of dried mush-

rooms and a huge pile of spruce cones. The question is did they stock pile enough before new calorie sources are available in the spring.

The concept of food storage for the long winter is not unique to the wildlife of Alaska. The Dena'ina and Ahtna Athabascans of Southcentral Alaska constructed shallow holes or pits for storing fish for the winter. These caches were often lined with grass or birch bark and layered with grass and fireweed to keep fillets separated. They were an essential part of having enough resources to survive the winter until more food presented itself to them in the spring.

For Alaskans living in the bush, this is the time of year when they start taking stock in what resources they have left to feed the family until new resources are available. This is a straight up indictment on how well you and your community stored in the fall and

early winter and how well the land provided for you. There is little opportunity for fish and you may or may not have access to moose or caribou depending on seasons, migration timing and such. There are no berries in March and migrating birds will not be back for a few more months so options can be quite limited.

March is a time in native culture where the true spirit of sharing and community are highlighted. It is much easier to share your resources when there is plenty to go around and your cache is full. But sharing when your cache is depleted—that is the true meaning of community.

Todd Eskelin is a Wildlife Biologist at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. He specializes in birds and has conducted research on songbirds in many areas of the state.